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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MARCH 14, GOL LEADERS ON AMR MOUSSA'S PLAN, OTHER INITIATIVES

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In meetings with the Ambassador on December 6, March 14 officials reacted with skepticism to Amr Moussa's plan to solve the Lebanese political crisis. They believed that Nabih Berri, Michel Aoun, and Hizballah will find ways to reject it. Or, if they do accept it, that will signal that March 14 has been tricked on the cabinet balance. Nevertheless, our contacts in March 14 and the GOL told us that they will accept the Moussa initiative in principle if the other side does as well. The details will still need to be worked out by the Lebanese themselves through negotiations. Such negotiations cannot take place under duress, so acceptance in principle must trigger the end of the demonstrations. Our contacts prefer a different cabinet formula -- with three neutral ministers -- that would provide better guarantees against the Hizballah-Berri-Aoun alliance, and they hope Maronite Patriarch Sfeir blesses their approach. Regardless of their skepticism, March 14 officials find the Moussa proposal useful, in that Berri, Aoun, and Hizballah cannot summarily dismiss a proposal from the Arab League. In terms of USG reactions to Moussa's ideas, the March 14 contacts urge us not to get bogged down into details. Instead, the USG should force Moussa to focus on the real issue -- not the cabinet allocations but rather that one Arab League member strives to undermine its neighbor. Moussa must consider the stakes for the Arab League, for Sunni Muslims, and for Egypt, if an Iranian-backed plan to take over Lebanon succeeds because of Syria. Remind him of Iraq and Kuwait circa 1990, one contact argued, and what that did to Arab credibility. Claiming it to be a Berri initiative to show his usefulness to Damascus, our contacts also dismissed the argument that Syrian-Saudi reconciliation would help solve Lebanon's problems. End summary.

AMR MOUSSA'S INITIATIVE

12. (C) On December 6 in separate meetings, the Ambassador saw several close advisors to March 14 leaders: Marwan Hamadeh (close to Walid Jumblatt), Mohamed Chatah and Rola Nouredine (advisors to PM Fouad Siniora) and Ghattas Khoury (part of Saad Hariri's inner circle). While there were some variations in the details, all described Amr Moussa's proposal to address Lebanon's political crisis as containing the following elements:

-- Quick study by all parties of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon documents, with quick approval by Lebanon's cabinet

and parliament;

-- Expansion of the cabinet to 30 members, with 19 belonging to March 14 and its allies, 10 belonging to the Hizballah-Amal-Aoun alliance, and 1 neutral minister (picked by Berri but approved by Siniora);

-- Early presidential elections, proposed for February, by the existing parliament;

-- A new cabinet (required whenever presidential elections take place), possibly with the "blocking minority" (one-third-plus-one) given to Hizballah-Amal-Aoun at this point;

-- Discussion and adoption of a new parliamentary election law;

-- early parliamentary elections (or, some insisted, discussion of this possibility but not yet a commitment to early elections).

MARCH 14 SKEPTICAL

13. (C) Our contacts were skeptical about the Moussa proposal. If it is serious, then Hizballah, Amal, and Aoun will probably scramble in looking for politically acceptable ways to reject it, they said: Hizballah doesn't want the tribunal, Aoun will see how difficult it is for him to become president, and Berri loathes the possibility of early parliamentary elections in which he might lose his Speaker position. If, on the other hand, Berri signals support, then there's probably a trick that the clever Berri has inserted

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into the deal. Hamadeh said that he expected Berri has so far remained studiously ambiguous about Moussa's proposal for two reasons: first, he awaits the return of two Amal MPs he sent to Damascus, to gauge Syrian reactions. Second, Berri ("a clever fox") is trying to come up with a way to assign the neutral minister in way to be able to argue that the 19-10-1 cabinet split actually gives the March 8-Aoun alliance the blocking minority they have sought all along.

BUT MARCH 14 STILL FINDS
MOUSSA INITIATIVE USEFUL

14. (C) Nevertheless, our contacts agreed, March 14 would accept the Moussa proposal in principle, if the other side does the same. Acceptance of the proposal by both sides in principle should trigger the dismantling of the sit-in in downtown Beirut and an end to the March 8-Aoun demonstrations. March 14 refuses to discuss the details with (as Khoury put it, referring to ongoing demonstrations) "guns pointed at our heads," At that point, the two sides can sit down together to flush out the details of how this might work. As Chatah and Nouredine argued, the Moussa proposal is useful in that Berri, Aoun, and Hizballah cannot reject an Arab League initiative out of hand, as they have the proposals forwarded by March 14 and GOL officials. Hamadeh speculated that the Higher Shia Council communique that afternoon, calling on the Arab League to be "neutral," was, however, an ominous sign, as that hints at a Shia campaign to brand Moussa's initiative as unacceptably Sunni in nature or too close to GOL positions.

LOOKING FOR PATRIARCH'S BLESSING
ON ANOTHER IDEA FOR CABINET SPLIT

15. (C) Chatah and Hamadeh briefed the Ambassador on another initiative that they are hoping Maronite Patriarch Sfeir will bless: most of the elements echo Moussa's plan, but the cabinet would split 18-9-3, a variation on Siniora's earlier

proposal of a 19-9-2 division. The three neutral ministers (who would not vote in the case of a split between March 14 and March 8-Aoun) would represent the Sunni, Shia, and Christian communities. March 14 would give up one of its ministerial portfolios to increase the number of seats for the neutral ministers. In this way, while March 14 would not be able to push through any decrees without support from some of the March 8-Aoun ministers, it would be less likely that March 8-Aoun could find a way to get an additional minister to topple the cabinet at will, as would be possible in the split proposed by Moussa. Chatah reported that Sheikh Michel Khoury, the octogenarian/senior statesman son of Lebanon's first president, would meet with Patriarch Sfeir to seek his blessing. (Note: The Ambassador will dine with Sheikh Michel on 12/7 for a read-out. End note.) But all of these cabinet changes depend on acceptance of the special tribunal, Chatah and Hamadeh emphasized.

SAUDI-SYRIAN RECONCILIATION
A TRICK TO PROMOTE BERRI?

16. (C) Khoury noted that Moussa had proposed a second initiative that was immediately rejected by March 14: an Arab quadripartite delegation (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria) to come to Beirut and negotiate a settlement among the Lebanese. This, Khoury said, moves Lebanon exactly in the wrong direction. Hamadeh and Chatah expressed deep skepticism as well about Nabih Berri's push for a reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Syria as key to solving the problem in Lebanon. In their view, a Saudi-Syrian rapprochement will just embolden the Syrians, but it will prove to the Syrians the value of Berri himself. With Syria relying ever more on Hizballah and less on Berri, the Speaker is "desperate" to show that he is useful to Bashar. Thus, Hamadeh concluded, Berri is exploiting people's concern about Lebanon in order to advance something Syria wants and for which he can then claim credit. "Don't fall in this trap," Hamadeh urged, referring to the logic that Syrian-Saudi friendship might help Lebanon.

USG URGED TO FORCE MOUSSA
TO FACE "REAL ISSUE" OF SYRIA

17. (C) Asked what the USG reaction should be to the Moussa
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plan, our four interlocutors were united: we should not get drawn into the details. Discussing what the details mean or the possible variations should be left to the Lebanese. Moreover, engaging Moussa on the details gets Moussa off the hook regarding what is actually going on and what should be the focus of Arab League concern. Lebanon's political crisis actually has very little to do with cabinet allocations, Hamadeh noted, especially since all but two of the 4,800-plus cabinet decisions taken by the Siniora government since July 2005 were taken by consensus, with the Shia on board. So the U.S. should not talk about cabinet allocations with Moussa. "Don't let him pretend that's the real issue."

18. (C) Instead, the U.S. should force Moussa to acknowledge that the real problem is Syria -- one Arab League member is using all tools at its disposal in order to undermine the democratically elected, constitutional government of another Arab League member. "Remind him of Iraq and Kuwait, circa 1990," Hamadeh urged, "only this is worse because of Iran's ambitions" Moussa should be made to see clearly the negative implications for the Arab world, for the Arab League, for Sunni Muslims, for Egypt, and for Moussa himself, should Iran succeed because of Syrian actions to take control of Lebanon. Arab credibility and especially Arab League credibility should be Moussa's real concern. "Get Moussa to focus on the cause, not the symptoms," Chatah said, "that's where his value-added should be." There are lots of initiatives that can be floated, but if Syria orders it allies to reject them

all, then nothing can be done.

FELTMAN